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ABSTRACT

The development of a positive self-concept and self-esteem can affect thinking, feeling, attitudes, and behavior, and determine what children are and their successes in later life. Noting the importance of development of self-concept and self-esteem in the early years, this booklet provides some background information and specific strategies to develop a positive self-concept in preschool children in inclusive settings. The booklet distinguishes between self-concept (the perceived reactions of others in social situations) and self-esteem (personal judgment about one's own worth). The booklet also provides a rationale for developing a positive awareness of self in an integrated setting and examines the role of the early childhood educator in this development. This role includes establishing a daily routine, maintaining realistic expectations, encouraging independence and control, accepting negative feelings, and providing an appropriate physical, social, and emotional environment. The remainder of the booklet presents activities to enhance self-esteem, including greetings on arrival, notice boards, lifelines, listening, and dramatic play. (Contains 20 references.) (AP)

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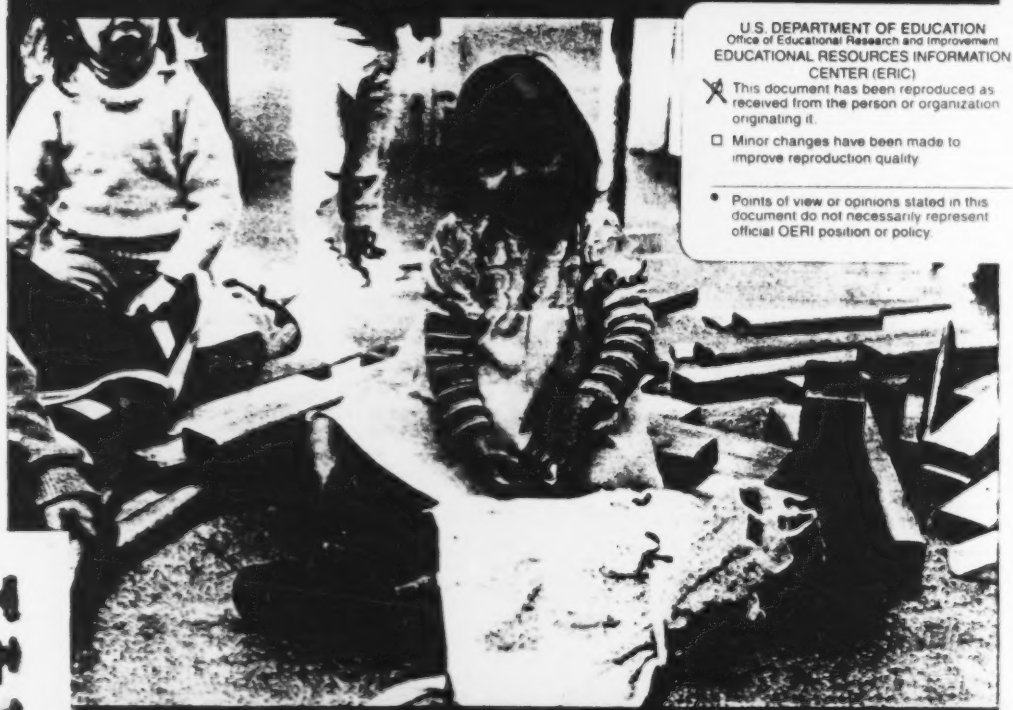

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The Resource Book Committee invites contributions on all aspects of the education and care of young children. Given the multi-disciplinary nature of the field, contributions from all disciplines concerned with young children and their families are welcome.

All Resource Book manuscripts are required to undergo a blind review by readers experienced in the field and will not necessarily be published. The style of the Resource Books must be simple and informative. Jargon and the presumption of prior knowledge should be avoided. Guidelines for contributors are available on request from the Publications Section.

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Promoting Self-esteem

in integrated early childhood settings

Sue Tarrant & Deslea Konza

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In all the world
there is
no other
child
exactly
like you.

In the millions
of years
that have
passed,
there has
never been
a child
like you.

Pablo Casals

(Feeney et al., 1987)

Promoting Self-esteem in Integrated Early Childhood Settings

Those involved in the early childhood field are increasingly finding children with a wide range of additional needs attending their child care services. Additional needs children are defined as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children, culturally diverse children or children with disabilities.

It is now policy in Australia to include *all* children in regular child care environments wherever possible (Gow et al., 1987). It is certainly the wish of most parents to have their children, whatever their difference or disability, included with neighbourhood children in early childhood services rather than in a segregated setting, or solely receiving therapy and special services at home. This need is further recognised by the Department of Human Services and Health which funds resource workers to help early childhood service providers to provide culturally and developmentally appropriate quality care for the integration of children with additional needs.

This places an additional responsibility on those people working in the early childhood field to provide an appropriate environment for these children. It also provides a wonderful opportunity to contribute in a positive way to the development of greater tolerance and to the promotion of shared values, adaptibility and an awareness of the needs of others in all young children.

This booklet aims to provide some background to our current understanding of the development of self-concept in young children, to explain the important role of the early childhood educator and to provide specific strategies that will promote the development of a positive self-concept in young children.

The early years

During the early years a child acquires the ability to communicate and to relate to others and begins to develop a sense of self (Kaplan, 1986). For these reasons intervention goals should include, and emphasise, the development of social learning. In very simple terms the aims of early childhood programs should be to help a child:

- become more aware of personal needs and how to address them;
- develop a positive self-concept;
- relate to others; and
- become aware of society as a whole.

What is self-concept?

We are not born with a particular self-concept, nor are we born with low or high self-esteem. Awareness of self is a learned process which takes place over a long period of time and is shaped to some degree by every event of life. It is also influenced by achievements in all areas, i.e. physical, cognitive, social, emotional and language development. Positive feelings

about ourselves can have a profound effect on our ability to realise our full potential. The problems facing children who are in some way different are compounded by the attitudes, reactions and expectations of others, and our society's emphasis on the value of beauty, physical strength and academic ability in particular.

The notion of self-concept is extremely complex (Johnston, 1989). Definitions and methods of assessment have been disputed for many years, and to understand the factors which affect the development of self-concept we need to look at the terms *self-concept* and *self-esteem*.

Self-concept

One of the first theorists to highlight the intimate relationship between the individual and his or her social environment was Cooley (1902). He coined the term *looking glass self* to describe the way in which an individual's self-concept is determined by the perceived reactions of others in social situations.

This notion of the importance of feedback was refined by Sullivan (1953) who believed that feedback received from particular people was perceived by the individual as being more important than feedback from others. He coined the term *significant others* to describe those with the greatest influence. Mothers are generally considered to be significant others, particularly for young children. Others who fall into this category may be caregivers and teachers.

The quality of the interactions between infants and primary caregivers is very important and forms the basis of feelings about self in later life (Mitchell, 1987). The accepted premise is that formation of self depends on the types of relationships individuals have with the important people in their lives.

The term *self-concept* describes the perceptions, feelings and attitudes that a person has about himself or herself (Marshall, 1989). It refers to many aspects of self including physical characteristics, cognitive ability, gender and ethnic identity. The development of self-concept relies on information received from the environment through interaction with others, especially parents, caregivers, teachers, siblings and peers.

Mothers are generally considered to be significant others, *a term used to describe those with the greatest influence.*

Self-esteem

Self-esteem refers to our personal judgement about our own worth. It is affected by our perceived level of importance to those around us and whether we possess culturally valued traits or not. It involves a need for recognition by others. The picture one has of *self* is seen as a major factor in motivating behaviour—a powerful force which directs immediate behaviour and determines future development (Rogers, 1951).

Why are self-concept and self-esteem important?

All areas of development are interrelated. Social and emotional development, particularly the development of a positive self-concept and self-esteem, can affect thinking, feeling, attitudes and behaviour, and determine what we are and our successes in later life.

The development of a positive self-concept and self-esteem in young children is considered to lead to:

- children who feel good about themselves and who in turn act kindly towards others;
- children who can accept and appreciate themselves and others;
- children who are happy and therefore more productive;
- children who can form positive relationships with others;
- children who can feel respected, valued and powerful;
- children with creativity and the motivation for learning;
- children who are prepared to persevere and thereby accomplish goals;
- children who are honest, loyal and cooperative;
- children who can accept responsibility;
- children who can develop coping skills;
- children who can accept rules and limits more readily;
- children who understand that disappointment is just a part of life;
- children who can deal with disappointment in a positive way; and
- children who appreciate the individual value of every person they meet.

Children who are confident in their ability to cope and succeed are usually able to relate to adults and peers in a rewarding and acceptable way. On the other hand, 'research shows that low self-concept is related to poor mental health, poor academic achievement and delinquency' (Marshall, 1989, p 45). Without peer acceptance and therefore the lack of opportunity to improve social skills, low self-esteem is reinforced.

Developing a positive awareness of self in an integrated setting

The young child realises that he/she is a separate being as a result of interaction with the environment (Piaget, 1970). These interactions may be influenced by:

- the age of the child;
- quality of the environment;
- the quality of adult/child interaction; and
- the quality of peer interaction.

It is generally accepted that true recognition of self occurs at around 18–24 months. Schurch writes that 'children as young as two show awareness of ethnic and gender differences: they notice disabilities'(1989, p.2), and Pettman (1986, p.19) stated that 'Racism and sexism, for example, are evident in many Australian children by the age of three or four'. It could be assumed that attitudes towards disabilities can also be formed at the same time.

There are two important learning areas which influence the development of self in early childhood:

- young children begin to learn about themselves—becoming aware of how others feel about them and slowly developing a picture of themselves as likeable people, or otherwise; and
- they begin to learn the skills necessary for social interaction, as they discover the similarities and differences between themselves and others, and develop either feelings of acceptance and enjoyment of diversity, or of discomfort, fear and rejection.

(Schurch, 1989, p.2)

There is an underlying belief that placing children with additional needs in regular child care settings or classrooms will enhance social interaction and that children learn through imitation. However, the placement of children with additional needs in an integrated setting does not necessarily result in progress or success in learning. Strategies are needed to encourage interaction (Hill & Reed, 1989).

Louise Derman-Sparks in her book *The Anti-Bias Curriculum* (1989) suggests that a program which accepts and values diversity and complements family experiences is most likely to encourage a positive self-concept. Caregivers and teachers need to structure the environment to provide plenty of opportunities for children to practise interaction skills with adults and other children.

The role of the early childhood educator

The following guidelines may assist in providing an environment which encourages interaction and helps develop a positive self-concept in all children.

Establish a daily routine

A secure environment increases the confidence of young children and assists them in developing trust. Predictability, that is, knowing what is likely to happen next, will also help reduce fear which can destroy self-esteem. Establishing a daily routine while maintaining some flexibility is an important part of the caregiver's responsibility.

Maintain realistic expectations

Caregivers, teachers and parents should have appropriate and realistic expectations for each child through an awareness of each child's ability. Activities offered should provide both a challenge and an opportunity to meet with success. To do this, explain any directions or tasks fully using a step by step or task-analysis approach. A routine for washing hands, for example, may be as follows:

Caregivers should have appropriate and realistic expectations for each child through an awareness of each child's ability.

1. Turn on tap. (If you do this for the child, describe what you are doing, or guide a willing child to assist you.)
2. Take the soap.
3. Wet the soap and hands.
4. Rub the soap.
5. Put down the soap.
6. Rub the hands together.
7. Rinse the hands.
8. Turn off the tap.
9. Take the towel.
10. Dry the hands.
11. Put back the towel.

(Pieterse et al., 1989, p.37.)

When explaining the routine of washing hands, ensure that on some occasions the child has an opportunity to observe the difference before and after washing.

Teaching by demonstration is important for all children, particularly with young children with additional needs. There are occasions, however, when you should avoid giving too much assistance. Allowing children to attempt an activity independently or resisting the

temptation to offer too much help will show that you value their efforts, particularly when children are producing works of 'art'. Remember, fear of failure or lack of success lowers self-esteem. When offering praise do not evaluate the children or their work but be positive in your description of the effort, colour, shape, texture and so on. It is important to remember that it is the process and not the product which is important in young children's art and craft experiences.

Encourage independence/control

Encourage children to assess their own achievements and so learn to protect themselves from dependence on what other people think.

To develop a positive self-image and a secure feeling about themselves, children should be given the opportunity to make choices and decisions and to feel some degree of control over their lives. This can take the form of being the leader in a game, selecting a book to be read to the group, or a song to be sung by the group, or handing out fruit or drinks at snack time—to name just a few.

Accept negative feelings

Until now this discussion has concentrated on the use of positive actions and words, but young children also need help to handle negative feelings. They are a natural part of growth and development for all children, and acceptable outlets for strong feelings need to be provided as well as words to express them.

If a child is expressing frustration because a favourite toy is unavailable or has been broken, saying 'Don't be silly now, no need to cry about it' is denying the child the right to his or her very real feelings at that moment. On the other hand, saying 'I know you're upset because you really like to play with that toy—lots of the other children do too. How about we try to find another toy together?', acknowledges the feeling but redirects the energy into more productive activity.

Encourage children to realise it is acceptable to be angry and frustrated or to cry, and that those around them will still love, care and most importantly accept them. Such acceptance boosts self-esteem and confidence.

Provide an appropriate environment—physical, social and emotional

Young children should be able to see themselves reflected in the world around them as impressions gained from the environment can shape their thoughts and attitudes. Other people are mirrors which young children use to build their identity. Their whole life can be affected by the conclusions they draw. They are limited in their experience and their ability to critically analyse any given situation. They learn about the world around them by relating events to their own experiences.

Visual stimuli also affect a child's self-concept, as young children are vulnerable to stereotype and bias. Providing pictures and useful accessories will help children to gain an awareness of the immediate community as well as their world as a whole. More specific examples of ways to do this are suggested in the following section.

The environment should be structured to provide many opportunities for children to practise interaction skills with adults and other children. A range of materials can be used to do this. Various combinations of tables and chairs which allow for both small and larger group interaction should be provided.

A very large cardboard box turned on its side may become the special place for two young children to share ideas. A blanket placed over a table or between bookcases provides another semi-enclosed space which young children find very appealing and which provides further opportunities for small group interaction. In addition children should be encouraged to help each other as this will promote self-worth and develop reciprocal relationships which are important for interaction, feedback and reinforcement (Guralnick & Groom, 1987; Guralnick & Groom, 1988; Pieterse et al., 1988).

Indeed, an open atmosphere where children can discuss problems freely will reduce the fear and discomfort which often accompany the appearance of something or someone different or unfamiliar. While enhancing the security of each child, such an atmosphere actively demystifies difference. People interacting with young children need to have a positive attitude themselves and be able to take the time to listen, explain, share and relax as well as provide lots of praise and hugs.

A large cardboard box may become a special place for young children.

Activities to enhance self-esteem in children in integrated settings

Self-esteem can be developed through both spontaneous and structured play experiences throughout the day. The following suggestions are not new ideas and certainly not all inclusive. In most cases, they have simply undergone a shift in emphasis with particular attention given to children with a range of additional needs. They are designed to encourage a positive self-image through positive life experiences and to help children learn to like themselves—enabling them to cope with new people and situations with greater confidence.

Through these activities all young children should see themselves reflected within their own group and in the wider community. The ideas included are simple and practical and should assist caregivers and others to promote social interaction in a positive way.

The activities are designed to facilitate communication and language development, to provide appropriate opportunities for discovery learning, to encourage dramatic play, to use community resources effectively and, above all, to focus on the needs of the particular children within each service or program.

Unlike much of the special needs equipment which often seems to be accompanied by a 'special' price, the props required are relatively inexpensive and hopefully could be made by a caregiver or parent. Other culturally diverse resources, for example clothes, music, recipes, could be made or donated by members of the relevant community groups. The biggest investment would probably be a camera and several roles of film.

Greetings on arrival

Each child and accompanying parent should be greeted warmly on arrival. Personal definitions of what constitutes desirable family structures (for example, who the primary

caregiver should be, marital status of parent(s), cultural makeup of family) should not influence responses and attitudes towards family members.

Noticeboards

Notices of special fundraising activities, special events, specifically designed playgrounds, toy libraries or organisations which may be of interest to children with additional needs and their families should be displayed. Reference to such events in the newsletters will also bring them to mainstream attention. Remember that the literac levels of some family members may require particular consideration. Actual discussion of such events and activities may be required, rather than simply referring to a printed notice.

Newsletters

Photocopy a photograph of each child and include one in each newsletter you prepare for the parents. This allows each child to be the 'star' for a week and for information regarding the child's special achievements, whatever they may be, to be publicised. This is also a positive way to disseminate information about children with particular needs.

Photographs of the children

Have the name and a picture of each child attending the early childhood service prominently displayed. Perhaps extend this to include a photograph of the child as a neonate or infant for comparison purposes. Include necessary aids and equipment for children with disabilities (e.g. hearing aids) so that they become an accepted part of the total picture of that child. This display is likely to be a source of much interest and discussion for parents and children alike.

Birthday chart

Keep a wall chart displaying each child's special day.

Picture file

Build up a file of pictures for each enrolled child and include all members of the family, their homes, pets and so on. Pictures should include children using any specialised equipment or interacting with support personnel (for example, speech therapists). They are useful discussion starters and should be laminated for use over a long period.

My special box

Provide each child with their own special box with their name on it which can be used to store all the things which they regard as special.

Posters

Posters displayed should depict active people of all ages, shape, size, family background and ability in a variety of environments. They should include people doing activities familiar to children—dressing, working, playing both indoors and out—and using a variety of skills. There should be a balance of individual, small and large group situations. If these posters prove hard to find or too expensive, take photographs of the children in the program or service in a range of situations. Adults with the same disability as children attending the centre should be featured as well. There is often a fear on the part of a disabled child (and other children) that people with disabilities do not grow up—perhaps due to the historic practice of keeping people with disabilities out of sight of mainstream society. Young

children with disabilities need to know that they too can grow up and achieve many of the normal milestones of adulthood.

Pictures of people from other cultures should not only be of situations or places that are unfamiliar but also depict Australian lifestyle and community situations. For example, Asian families should be seen in Australian settings, not only in their country of origin.

Life lines

Cut a length of string for each child, attach individual children's names and then place each piece of string in a position which is both easily accessible and easily seen. As each child completes an artwork or craft item or brings in a photograph of a special event, attach it to their lifeline for everyone to see how they are growing, changing and achieving. Children's visits to hospital, operations and so on should also be included to demonstrate that these are an accepted and normal part of many people's lives. Attendance at cultural celebration days or festivals could also be recorded on the lifelines.

Alternatively, frequently display each child's work at the children's eye level.

Eye and hair collage

Collect magazine pictures of different eyes and hair as seen in children attending the program, for example, brown, black, blonde and auburn, curly and straight, long and short. Similarly, eyes can be blue, brown or hazel and differ in shape. Encourage the children to pick out pictures of eyes and hair which are basically the same colour as their own and discuss the differences in style and shape with them. Further develop the discussion to point out that differences are found in all children, not just children labelled as 'special'.

Drawings of me

Trace around each child on a large sheet sheet of paper and include each child's name. The children could add details using crayons, paint or collage. Display the drawings.

Books

Create a special book for each child. Include a photograph and brief notes on favourite foods, things they enjoy and so on. Add to the book at any time as special events occur.

Develop a group book which includes a photograph of each child and a few notes of interest for all. It can be used at group time to promote discussion, or made available during free play for the children to browse through at their leisure.

Purchased books should include some which positively reflect the lifestyles of people with additional needs and abilities.

Puzzles

Take pictures of all the children either individually or in small groups. Have them enlarged or photocopied to approximately 20cm x 25cm. Laminate and glue to heavy cardboard. Draw lines on the back of your puzzle to create as few or as many pieces as you wish. Put the child's initials or a code on the back of each piece for ease of recognition if the pieces become separated.

Another method is to use tongue-depressors. Tape the sticks together initially and outline your picture in black texta. Once glued, cut through the picture at the appropriate points. Using pictures of the children themselves ensures that all are represented, rather than just the stereotypes often used in commercial productions.

Pass a mirror around for each child to chant.

Mirror, mirror

Once the children are aware of and have confidence in their own special characteristics, form a circle and pass a mirror around for each child to chant:

> *Mirror, mirror in my hand*
> *Tell my why I'm special*
> *I know you can.*

Each child is then given the opportunity to say why they think they are special.

Alternatively, decorate a box complete with a lid and glue a mirror to its base. Discuss with each child who they think the most special person in the world is and then allow them to look inside to reveal just who this really is. Encourage each child to keep secret the identity of who is special until everyone has had a turn.

Card games

Take photographs of all the children and have two of each print developed. Laminate each photograph and they can be used as cards to play matching games; sorting and classifying games; 'Who is missing? 1,2,3 look and see'.

Listening activities

Tape-record the children's voices individually. Play it back and have the children guess who is speaking. Play the game 'I am thinking of someone who is wearing...', and again have the children guess who it is you are describing.

Language

Provide opportunities for the children to talk about their homes and things that are special to them. Give simple, direct and accurate answers to questions. Display words or signs commonly used at home by hearing-impaired, language delayed or bilingual children, for example, toilet and welcome notices. Self-esteem is enhanced by feelings that their individual languages are accepted.

Songs

Sing songs which can include the children's names. Many songs can also be signed. Teach all the children to sign the names of children and adults and sing songs which can include the signed names, particularly if you have signing children in attendance. Songs from other cultures should also be included in the program to help children realise that there are many languages and accents in the world.

Treasure or sensory boxes

On some occasions include items in the sensory or treasure box that are used by children with additional needs—perhaps spectacle frames, a knee brace, tactile book, moulded cutlery or other adapted equipment, artefacts or utensils used in the homes of people from different cultures.

Centre of interest

On occasions display equipment or events that are of special significance to children with additional needs and their parents. Displays of origami, Aboriginal art, or basket weaving would also be appropriate.

Dramatic play

Include props which are required by children with special needs, for example, special eating utensils, braces or crutches. Encourage the children to try out the equipment and discuss how it feels and how difficult it is to use.

Boxes which are often used as cars or buses can be extended to become wheelchairs. Have special needs accessories for the dolls and teddies including heavy glasses, hearing aids and bandages. For outdoor play include a wheelchair for the children to try. Always supervise these opportunities for children to explore the special equipment and remind them to respect all equipment.

Everyday and festival clothes from a range of countries will contribute to a feeling of acceptance. Other items for dramatic play could include food packaging labelled in other languages. Cubby houses could be constructed using canvas, palm fronds, tree branches and so on.

Make laminated cut out figures using a photograph of each child and glue to heavy cardboard. Slip into placecard holders or make same from wood offcuts and allow the children to use them as props during sand, block or home corner play.

Puppets

Puppets appeal to children of all ages and are commonly used to deliver messages to them about looking after their bodies—against drugs, for example.

Powell (1989) tried the idea of using puppets to change peer attitudes towards disability and reported great success. She recommends using puppets which have moveable mouths and made to the size of the average four-year-old for realism. Of course, the puppet's appearance must suit the disability under discussion.

It should be remembered that not all children look different. Some children look the same as others but cannot perform as well, or suffer from asthma and use a ventilator regularly, or have epileptic seizures. Alternatively, the additional need may not be the result of a genetic disorder—the child's appearance may have changed as a result of severe scarring or birthmarks. It is important that all aspects of disabilities are taken into account when depicting children with additional needs.

Puppets can also be purchased which have skin tones, hair, facial features and dress representing different cultures.

Have a selection of dolls covering a range of disabilities and cultures available for the children to use.

Dolls

Have a selection of homemade or purchased dolls covering a range of disabilities and cultures available for the children to use. It is important not to discard dolls with missing limbs, eyes or other damaged parts unless they are unsafe. Such actions give very powerful messages to children about how the 'less than perfect' doll/child should be treated. It is preferable to bandage the hurt parts or adapt play situations to cater for these 'disabilities'. They can also be useful for problem-solving discussions.

Visitors

Invite an adult with a disability who can identify and feel comfortable with young children. Ask them to talk briefly about their disability and how they are able to lead enjoyable and productive lives. Encourage them to answer any questions asked by the children simply and honestly. Invite a 'famous' person in the community who has a disability, for example, an athlete or a media personality, or bring pictures of same and discuss how they have made a positive contribution to society. Ask any additional needs or bilingual worker who attends the centre to talk to the children about their role.

Excursions

Visit a local playgroup or another program where children with additional needs are in attendance. Perhaps visit the Theatre of the Deaf or an ethnic dance performance.
What can young children learn from these activities?

- *I am special and there is no-one else quite like me.*
- *I have my own special name and day.*
- *I am like others in some ways, yet different in others.*
- *Some things are hard to do; some things I cannot do well.*
- *Some things I can do easily; some things I do well.*
- *I am special and therefore others can be special too.*
- *My thoughts and ideas are important and others have good ideas too.*
- *Some children are special because they have extra needs.*
- *I like myself —I am a likeable person. I can like other people.*
- *I am not uncomfortable with differences; I value differences.*

Conclusion

By providing an environment of acceptance and one which will help a child achieve success, early childhood educators will not only improve the self-esteem and self-concept of the children in their care, but will help to develop a more accepting attitude in the community at large.

Acceptance, however, is not enough. A child can survive on acceptance, but they will not grow on it. They need something stronger—they need to feel genuinely valued, precious, special and to like who they are. The concepts of self-esteem and respect for others are the very foundations of human rights. Time spent encouraging and developing these concepts in early childhood is time well spent (Pettman, 1986; Vella, 1990).

A positive self-concept is the best gift we can give any child.

An environment of acceptance will improve the self-esteem and self-concept of children in care

Do what you can
with what you have.

Theodore Roosevelt

(Feeney et al., 1987)

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